

BRIAN J. COLE

Chicago

MD'90, MBA'90

- Team physician for the Chicago Bulls, Chicago White Sox, Chicago Red Stars, the Joffrey Ballet, and several other sports teams and schools
- Professor, orthopaedic surgeon, and shoulder/elbow/knee surgery and sports medicine specialist at Rush University Medical Center. Associate chair and managing partner of Midwest Orthopaedics at Rush, and section head of Rush's Cartilage Restoration Center



Brian Cole, MD'90, MBA'90, with Benny the Bull. Cole has been the head team physician of the Chicago Bulls since 2005.

Interrupting his MD for an MBA

After his third year at Pritzker, Cole took a full year off and earned an MBA through an accelerated program at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business — a decision he made during “a very transitional time” in healthcare.

“It was becoming clear I’d need some business knowledge to have influence and control in decision-making,” Cole said. “I saw the importance of business in medicine. Without competency in anything other than science and math, I felt professionally vulnerable and became concerned there would be a substantial risk for missed opportunities. The MBA gave me credibility, a working vocabulary and the ability to ask the right questions with proper intellectual constructs, so I could participate in all things related to the business of medicine.”

That education laid the foundation for many of Cole’s research projects, product development initiatives and business ventures, such as establishing ambulatory surgical centers, medical office buildings and physician-led physical therapy centers, and helping manage initiatives with his practice, Midwest Orthopaedics at Rush (MOR) in Chicago. Eventually, he became managing partner of what is now the second-largest orthopaedic group in Chicago. MOR has 900-plus employees.

He knew it after Pitt

Cole loves orthopaedics because it involved many scientific disciplines, including biochemistry, anatomy, biomechanics and physiology. He can also regularly perform translational research, investigating clinically relevant questions with answers that deliver better solutions and outcomes for his patients.

An active person and sports fan, he enjoyed treating high school athletes and exposure to team physician responsibilities with the New York Mets during his residency at the Hospital for Special Surgery at Cornell Medical Center. A sports medicine fellowship with the University of Pittsburgh’s football team



Cole finds helping world-class athletes return to form to be especially rewarding.

spurred his desire to work with high-level and professional athletes.

“After that fellowship and a few years of practice, opportunities became available,” he said.

Surgeon to the sports stars

He refused to name-drop or share details, but Cole’s patients include some of the biggest names in sports. Treating professional athletes is much different from treating recreational athletes, he said — not only because of the physical demands of their sports, but because decision-making is far more complex, given the number of stakeholders and the financial impact of missed time from play.

Top athletes have access to the best care, but treatment decisions may factor in issues like contract length, the athlete’s desire or willingness to play in pain, other doctors’ opinions, or the wishes of the team’s coaches or front office.

“There’s a lot more pressure on team healthcare providers, because the cost to an organization in aggregate due to health-related challenges can be hundreds of millions of dollars,” Cole said. “An ACL tear or even a simple sprained ankle can have a huge economic impact on an entire franchise. It can mean wins and losses to an organization.”

What he loves about his job

Helping people never gets old for Cole, and he does not take that feeling for granted.

“Sports-related injuries are rarely a matter of life and death. But if you’re an individual who has shoulder pain or knee pain? And can’t sleep or can’t walk a block? And we can provide treatment where they can feel ‘normal’ again? That’s an amazing thing to be able to do. It is a gift that keeps on giving and provides immense fulfillment and satisfaction,” he said.

For many athletes, the fear of never playing again — or never playing at their pre-injury level — is very real, Cole said. Any loss in performance can mean the end of their career, their college scholarship or their lifelong passion.

Helping world-class athletes return to form can be especially rewarding. Cole recalled watching one of his patients play his first game after a complex knee ligament reconstruction and nearly a year of rehabilitation and recovery.

“After his first game back, he came up to me and there were literally tears,” Cole said. “Some of the athletes I’ve reconstructed have returned after rehab and surpassed their pre-injury statistics, which is particularly gratifying. Being just a small part of that, and being part of their bigger multidisciplinary team, is something special and a true privilege.”

Scientific research and product development

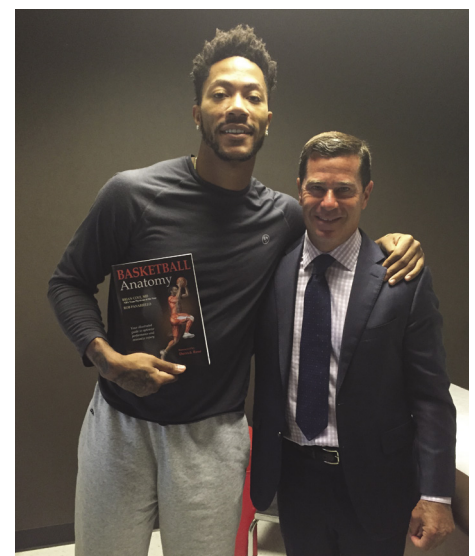
Research is a major component of Cole’s work. He started a cartilage transplant program that provides alternatives to joint replacement, holds several medical device patents, and has developed and popularized multiple sports medicine innovations and minimally invasive surgical procedures in use today.

He’s worked to make implants more reliable and researched ways to use orthobiologics (growth factor therapy) to promote swifter healing. He travels and teaches worldwide in addition to training residents and fellows at Rush, and has authored more than 1,000 peer-reviewed papers and 17 textbooks on orthopaedics and sports medicine.

In recent years, Cole has been interested in a more holistic approach to musculoskeletal medicine. He recently launched AGYL, a new joint health supplement, after three years of development.

Family matters

Cole and his wife, Emily, a prosecutor and supervisor for the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office, have three children, Ethan, Adam and Ava. All are avid skiers, sailors and fitness enthusiasts.



Cole with Derrick Rose (left), a Chicago native who was drafted No. 1 overall by the Bulls and later became NBA MVP.